

# bollywood

## Faltering in the festival circuit

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Cannes has been India's dream. In many ways, India, its film fraternity and its political bosses have had this desire to copy Cannes. And perhaps strengthen the historic link between the city on the French Riviera and India. It was there that 54 years ago Indian cinema found a place on the global map.

Satyajit Ray's first feature, *Pather Panchali*, which he struggled to make, even pawning wife Bijoya's jewels, won a minor award but a major recognition. But it did not almost happen, for the jury, which included master-critics like Francois Truffaut, had given Ray's work a miss.

However, better sense prevailed somewhere and with someone, and the movie was rescreened for the jury. It is of course history that *Pather Panchali* took the world by storm, and its creator went on to become a cinema great.

It is perhaps this association with Cannes, among other reasons, that impels Indians to be part of the city's annual cinema festival. Or, at least have a piece of the grand French Riviera here in India.

In the early 2000s, both Sushma Swaraj and Ravi Shankar Prasad, who were one after the other ministers for information and broadcasting in the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government in New Delhi, spared no effort to make the prime International Film Festival of India into another Cannes.

They even chose sea-swept Panaji in Goa as a permanent venue for the Festival.

However, India's presence at the annual Cannes Film Festival, which just closed its 63rd edition, is a far more significant development than the attempt to turn Goa in a Cannes.

I still remember my early days there in the 1990s when I was just about the only Indian.

The picture is dramatically different today with several Indian movie companies (and journalists) putting up stalls in the Market. This year's participants included UTV Motion Pictures, IDream Independent Pictures, Accel Animation Studio, Supreme Communications, Sarthak Movies, Eros and others. India has had a pavillion on the beach, sponsored by the government and trade bodies.

What is more, Cannes has become a hot venue for announcing Indian film projects or screening first-look trailers, perhaps with the idea of catching the eye of Cannes' selectors.

The trend was first noticed in 2003 when Gurinder Chadha, British helmer of Indian origin, announced the launch of her *Bride and Prejudice*. She literally made a song and dance of it, showcasing Aishwarya Rai,

one of the movie's actresses and a member of that year's jury.

Rai soon turned into a lensman's delight, and became a diva of sorts. That *Bride and Prejudice* sank in a cauldron of champagne was soon forgotten.

At least, nobody at Cannes remembered that this year, when Rai made, what has now become, her annual pilgrimage to Cannes.

She came along with hubby Abhishek Bachchan and Tamil co-star, Vikram, to promote Mani Ratnam's bilingual *Raavan/Raavanan*, set for a mid-June opening. Ratnam himself could not come, as he was busy giving the final touches to the film with music director A R Rahman, but instead sent his wife, Suhasini, who penned the dialogues for *Raavanan*.

Produced by Reliance Big Pictures, the work explores whether the mythological character Raavan with 10 heads, 10 minds and a hundred voices did really exist. The story of an honest cop and his wife who have to confront a tribal, the movie looks at the bond between the hunter and the hunted.

The tribal represents the have-nots and is a law unto himself. In the final sequences, the prey and preyed are drawn into a battle that takes them into a deep jungle.

Rai plays the cop's wife, and Bachchan the tribal in the Hindi version. Tamil actor Vikram has a diametrically opposite role in either language, essaying the noble and the evil, probably a far more challenging assignment than Bachchan's or Rai's.

Yet, at Cannes, he seemed like an orphan with the Mumbai couple hogging the limelight. Another case of Tamil and

other South Indian language cinema being pushed to the corner.

There was one more lunch at Cannes. Shekar Kapur's *Paani*, whose principal photography will begin later this year.

On the looming water crisis that the world is now oblivious of, *Paani* sets its plot in a two-tier city.

The water rich live on top and the water poor below, and when the pretty daughter of a powerful water corporation's chairman is kidnapped by a water warrior from the city below, a furious torrent of events gushes out.

"It is the story of young love caught in the flurry of conflict and war between the two cities. It is the story of how the sacrifice of the young lovers brings water back to the people", said Kapur at a media conference. *Paani* is set to music by Rahman, and is actually an indictment of the big corporate takeover of the precious liquid.

Now, the larger question is, will films like *Paani* make it to the Cannes list? Kapur was sure that it will be part of the 2011 Festival.

Reliance and director Anurag Basu, whose Hrithik Roshan-Barbara Mori starrer *Kites* is fast drifting to doom just days after its worldwide theatrical release, had nursed big dreams last year at Cannes, where the picture's first look was revealed.

The Festival did not select *Kites*, and I can sum up the reason in a single sentence that Cannes' General Delegate, Thierry Fremaux, said to me this time: "Give me a good movie, and we will take it".

(Gautaman Bhaskaran covered the Cannes Film Festival for the 20th year this May.)



\* Tamil actor Vikram, who has a diametrically opposite role in the Mani-Ratnam directed bilingual *Raavan/Raavanan*, and probably a far more challenging assignment than Abhishek Bachchan's or Aishwarya Rai's, but was under-promoted at the Cannes Film Festival.



\* Rajat Barmecha plays the much put-upon teenager Rohan in the film *Udaan*.

### Udaan belies hope

It is only natural that Vikramaditya Motwane's *Udaan* arrived at the Cannes Film Festival literally on a flight of hope and expectation.

For, India has had a no-show for seven years, the last entry from the nation of 1,200 movies a year being in 2003. Murali Nair's *Arimpara* from Kerala had certainly been a rank bad choice, and poorly conceived and made.

And to boot, what a subject of a mole on a man's face growing with gigantic alarm!

Happily, *Udaan*, which I watched here, is by comparison a better work detailing the story of Rohan (played by debutant Rajat Barmecha), just about to touch 18, abused and ignored by a father (Ronit Roy) who does not even want his son to call him father. "Address me Sir", he commands after the boy had been expelled from his elite boarding school in Shimla for being caught watching a soft-porn movie in a city theatre.

When Rohan lands in Jamshedpur, his father forces military regimentation on the boy sans any paternal compassion or sense of fairness. Added to this, the man cruelly tramples upon Rohan's dream of becoming a writer (even burning the manuscript of his novel), forces him to study engineering and work in his recession-hit factory as a nothing more than a labourer.

Rohan has a little step-brother, Arjun (brilliantly essayed by Aayan Boradia), from his father's later marriage that the boy knew nothing about in the eight years he remained banished in the boarding and from his father's consciousness. Things turn a point of no-return when the father beats Arjun so brutally that he has to be rushed to hospital.

Arjun is a natural, and with his sense of perfect timing will endure to just about every viewer. So too will Jimmy (Ram Kapoor), Rohan's screen uncle. Other performers appear too wooden to impress, but what is far more unfortunate is the way Motwane has scripted Rohan's father, Bhairav Singh.

His character is too dark, too unidimensional to appear remotely convincing. *Udaan* makes him a complete villain, and stubbornly refuses to add even a wee bit of grey. The work suffers also because it has 30 minutes of flab that could have been easily chopped off.

Arguably, *Udaan* is not one the best Indian films made in recent months, but as Christian Jeune, the Festival's Deputy General-Delegate, told me, "We chose *Udaan* because we felt that it had a good chance of travelling". So be it, but one hopes that those hundreds of people who saw *Udaan* at Cannes would understand that India does make far better cinema. Only that it seldom screens it there.